



THE NATIONAL FOLIC ACID CAMPAIGN

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM?

The B vitamin folic acid, when taken before conception and during early pregnancy, can prevent the serious birth defects of spina bifida and anencephaly. In September 1992, CDC published the U.S. Public Health Service recommendation that all women of childbearing age consume 400 micrograms of folic acid daily to prevent these serious birth defects. FDA mandated fortification of cereal-grain products with folic acid to become effective in January 1998. Since 1998, CDC has worked with the National Council on Folic Acid to conduct a national educational campaign to inform women of reproductive age and their health care providers about the importance of consuming this vitamin before and during pregnancy. CDC is currently evaluating all efforts to increase women's knowledge of folic acid and its impact in preventing birth defects. CDC's birth defects monitoring programs show a decrease of 31% in the rates of spina bifida since folic acid fortification became mandatory.

WHAT HAS CDC ACCOMPLISHED?

- Worked with the National Council on Folic Acid to implement the national education campaign.
- Conducted a program for rapid ascertainment of rates of spina bifida and anencephaly, obtaining data quarterly from 26 states.
- Conducted surveys in 16 areas across the country to measure differences between knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs among targeted sub-groups of the population.
- Developed an intervention to increase use of vitamin supplements containing folic acid among women of childbearing age in a managed care setting and assessed the level of implementation and effects.
- Evaluated a free vitamin supplement distribution program and data collection procedures to assess its impact in several state-funded family planning clinics. Assessed the effectiveness of this distribution and education through qualitative and quantitative measures.
- Planned and conducted a community level intervention for predominantly Spanish-speaking women in two communities (Miami, FL and San Antonio, TX) to test the effect of a media-based community intervention.
- Developed an Internet-based folic acid education module for middle- and high-school students and tested its effectiveness in various classroom settings, schools, subject areas, and grades.
- Developed a classroom-based curriculum module on folic acid for teachers. Testing in classrooms began in fall 2001. Further development and plans for distribution are under way.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

- Initiate further behavioral studies to determine how to increase folic acid consumption in high-risk populations, including Hispanic women, women who have had previous pregnancies affected by these birth defects, and women not planning to become pregnant in the near future.
- Continue to monitor rates of spina bifida and anencephaly, placing special emphasis on high-risk groups.
- Implement an interactive, Web-based folic acid resource forum for partners.

For information about this or other CDC programs, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/programs>

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